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ABSTRACT

Two years' experience teaching in a college preparatory program for inner-city underachievers--two-thirds of whom were black--indicated that teachers must emphasize the self-discovery and self-assertion of bright students while easing up on repressive rules. English teachers face a sensitive situation in trying to correct grammar without implying that a student is inferior because his dialect is wrong. The motivation for uninhibited self expression may be provided by contributions to a weekly journal for which each student contributes anything--cribbed poetry, doodles, original writing, math assignments--which is not graded or corrected. Each week, superior items may then be put on the overhead projector, with the responsible student reading and the class commenting. Important factors to be remembered in reading the journal entries are that (1) the richness of black dialect, alone or in conjunction with standard English, is a valid means of expression; (2) black students like and should be encouraged to express black thoughts; and (3) excellent writing may be produced. The self-discovery and confidence which can result from such expression are valuable achievements. (Sample student writings are provided.) (JM)

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"I OBEY THE RULES AND REMAIN A FOOL"

By David P. Demarest, Jr.

I intend much of my "talk" to be a presentation, in which you'll be able to look at and listen to some of the work done in a program I've been teaching in for the past two years.

In 1968-69 Carnegie-Mellon University ran a half-day college preparatory program for a group of about thirty high school seniors. The students came from schools all over Pittsburgh, spending their mornings in the home high school and every afternoon on the campus taking an English course and a math course. They were all supposedly "underachievers"--a term they detested--bright kids with mediocre records; they all fit the label "inner-city"; two-thirds of them were black. The program was intended to motivate them toward college, and while it is a simplistic measure of real success, about three-fourths of them in fact went to college this fall, most with good scholarships (I have my fingers crossed about their continuing progress). This year we are running the same basic pattern again, now financed by Upward Bound money, for forty juniors and forty seniors. Regular college faculty--like myself--and graduate students are serving as teachers.

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Let me get to my real subject. My title comes from a poem written last year by a black twelfth-grader who is now a freshman at Bryn Mawr. This is what it looked like when it was handed in; and this is the voice of the author reading. (I should add that most of these oral deliveries are unrehearsed and often spontaneous in the sense that they were recorded before the very live audience of fellow classmates.) Here's the poem.

America, Land of Misery

America, I love but hate thee too,
I am cold, hungry and without shoes.
Why are you doing this to me,
America, land of misery?

America, I love but hate thy laws,
They are not in favor of my cause.
Why are you doing this to me,
America, land of misery?

America, I love but hate thy schools,
I obey the rules and remain a fool.
Why are you doing this to me,
America, land of misery?

America, I love but hate thy freedoms,
Why don't you take them back and keep them?
Why are you doing this to me,
America, land of misery?

America, I love but hate thy system,
It is not for me but for other men.
Why are you doing this to me,
America, land of misery?

I like this poem, which is one reason for showing it. And when I try to explain my methods in the course, I remember that line with the double rhyme--"I obey the rules and remain a fool."

My assumptions about so-called "underachievers" have a lot in common with those of Jonathan Kozol or Herbert Kohl. And I guess the line "I obey the rules and remain a fool" is another way of putting the title of James Hearndon's book The Way It Spozed To Be. I assume that many underachievers are bright kids who have never been able to find anything good to do in a classroom, who have been turned off by alien rules instead of encouraged to express themselves. Such generalizations probably apply particularly to blacks. Every black kid can tell you his own horror stories about the times teachers warned him that it is not nice to act too black in class. And it is a standard part of a black's growing up in America to arrive at that moment of career-choice in high school and be advised not to go into law but into carpentry or social work; you

can read about that in Malcolm or Richard Wright, but it often seems that there are as many examples of the story as there are black kids in a class. In English, teachers face a special and very difficult aspect of this general problem: how do you correct grammar according to the rules without giving a kid the feeling that his own dialect is wrong and that he is therefore somehow inferior? It's tricky, even with all sorts of good intentions.

I thus arrive at a working hypothesis: the rules must be eased up. Students must come to see that they already actually can do work that is good and important (and teachers can't fake this: teachers must genuinely be able to enjoy work that follows no tidy, conventional rule). Confidence and motivation are at stake, and underachievers--especially blacks--are not going to make it in a tough college without confidence and motivation. Middleclass whites have it different: the conveyor belt can carry them through; they don't have to exert much will-power if they don't want to. It is not adequate to think of bringing black underachievers up to the level of white middleclass students. They must bring themselves to something beyond that: they must consciously decide that they want college, and they must develop the motivation to prevail over what they find there. This is a big order, but I hypothesize that relaxing the rules may give the classroom a kinder face than it's had before, that students may be encouraged to risk the perils of college if they come to feel that the classroom may, potentially, allow them to

work cut for themselves the question of who they are, instead of telling them to obey the rules and remain a fool. Self-discovery, self-assertion must be the goals.

In addition to the usual theme assignments, I therefore institute as one major teaching (or learning) device something I'm sure many of you have tried--the weekly journal. The basic guidelines are simple: each week the student hands in several pieces of work; the important point is that the work is absolutely anything the student wants it to be--cribbed poetry, doodles, math assignments, cartoons, strings of cuss words, poems, shopping lists, essays, etc. This work is never graded or corrected, but simply recorded as handed-in. Sometimes I make comments, but the prime source of comment is the class itself, because early in the semester I begin to put on the overhead each week some things that are especially good out of the journals, asking the author to read aloud his own work and to answer questions from the class. The urge to write the journals should thus come from the class, and the journals will be good or bad in a given week in proportion to what kind of an urge the class has developed. (I must confess I've had some lean weeks, though never one that's been a total loss.)

I now want to show you some things I've received in journals and to make several additional specific points with them. The first point is this: slang and profanity can be beautiful; the second: black kids like to think black thoughts, so why not let them? the third is this: a teacher gets some plain good work from journals. Obviously, these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Slang and profanity are beautiful. Black dialect is a rich and vivid language, so why shouldn't black students use it in an English class where the teacher is probably proclaiming the importance of richness and vividness? Besides, blacks have the special advantage of knowing two dialects, because they also know the language of the white mainstream. Their divided environment has made them lifelong linguists who can shift back and forth between two linguistic worlds with effects that are often biting and witty. Further, their background has made many black students think seriously about language; they have a particular cultural readiness to respond to certain features of a study of language.

Here is a journal entry on drugs and drinking that is a relevant illustration of linguistic awareness.

> Today more and more young people find themselves getting high. The most common is drinking. Reefer is another way of becoming high that is becoming common. Heroin is finding its place too. Out of all these I have experienced two. These are drinking and reefer or bush. I like to get high off of both. The bush high is a smooth mellow high. It takes you through plenty of changes. It makes music sound better to me. It's slower and the instruments are more distinct. When I'm high off of bush

I like to listen to jazz. I could dig smoking about four "dynamite j's" and listening to 74 miles away. It gives you an out of sight "peck jones." That means it makes you hungry. It can make a bowl of beans taste like steak and mashed potatoes. When you've layed off some bad bush you can really do some square business rapping. It gives you the power to blow any broad's mind. "Grogging" is bad too. It's not mellow as "smoke" but it gives you a good partying high. Grog some vodka or gin or rum or "bushead" and you got a nice partying high. Drinking just might have some slight after effects. There are also another pretty nice high. This one is from nul's. All they do is make you nod. There are some other ones that I haven't tried and don't plan to. The "bo" high is a bad thing. I heard it puts you through a lot of weird changes. "Scag" is supposedly the baddest. They say it feels almost as good as sex. Some of the dudes I saw that have a "jones" be in pretty bad shape when they can't "get over." Those are the only ways I'm hep to either from hearsay or actual experience. I know you've been high off some drink before, but I recommend the bush to you.

This entry is, I think, rather typical of the kind of work students do when they work in the classroom with dialect: they are showing it off, enjoying its conspicuous display.

More polished performances may involve a conscious, careful working of one dialect against another, as in this entry.

Sometimes I amaze myself with my amount of Bladder Control.

I might as well own up to the fact that I'm fairly well hung up on cars. I don't know when or how this happened but now it's starting to get damn ridiculous.

The fact that I spend the greater portion of my time with my face stuck in a car magazine is part of this. I would estimate that since 1964 I've had over 200 various car magazines. I started with: Hot Rod. Then I moved on to Motor Trend. From there I went to Road & Track. Now I'm on Car & Driver which is the damn best of any of them.

Now comes the funny part. If I love cars so much, why the hell am I so bashful about it? I've found out that people thrugh the years who don't know a damn thing about cars can really put you on the spot. A couple of weeks ago the subject came up between me and a certain person who is hooked on Dodge Chargers. According to this person, a Charger was "bad" because "iss a baad mawfuckin' chine!" period. When I said something about a Road Runner, I got, "a mawfuckin' Sheveyll could beat a mawfuckin' Rowwed

Runnuh!" Nothing I could say about power-to-weight ratios, frontal-area, choce (sic) of engines, rear axle ratios etc. could budge this individual from his chauvinistic stand. ("get duh hayull outuh mah fayse mawfuckuh!")

Why didn't I tell him about the Chargers 375hp. engine against the Road Runner 425hp Hemi engine? Why didn't I tell him about the Road Runners lighter curb weight?, or a dozen other things that I could have rattled off like that (clic)? I'll retaliate now in this individuals language: "Ain' no mawfuckin' Chawjuh gon' beet no gawdamm Himmi Rowwed Runnuh no mawfuckin' taym!"

This kind of sophisticated, beautiful use of slang and profanity I've found supplemented by papers that explicitly theorize about language, as in this poem.

Masked Words

As I sat and listened
The words I heard had no meaning.
They were words with masks to hide their meaning.
The people who used such words wore masks
Masks of a pale white color.
Words of 14 letters instead of 4

Emphatic, pulchritude, fornication are masked words

Words of confused illusion.

Masked people speaking masked words

Complicated, confused, fat, illusionary words.

Is to be simple and direct being stupid?

Or do you mask your stupidity with masked words?

Another major topic that shows up in the journals--perhaps the major topic--is Blackness. It is the topic that is least avoidable and least desirable to avoid. If black students are to make it in many college situations, they are going to have to proclaim themselves loud and clear, as this typographic poem does.

I wonder

what Hell

is like!

I think I'll go

down there.

down

down

down

down

down

down

down

It's getting hotter than a motherfucker.

down

down

I can smell people burning.

down

down

down

I got a glimpse of them--they are all niggers.

down

I see a sign! I guess I'll read it.

"You are now entering the U.S. of America."

America?. I've heard of that place.

I'd better get the fuck out of here!

If such a piece captures the mood of black rebellion, the following poem is a rather complicated (and possibly unresolved) reflection on the role of violence.

That's life

That's what all the people say,

You're thinking Black in April,

But you're Uncle Tomming in May.

One of these days for sure you're gonna find

That they gonna lynch your two-faced behind.

Oh that's life
That's what all the people say,
You're burning cities in April,
Cities where you stay.
One of these days for sure you'll find
What's so bad about thunderbird wine.

I could illustrate journal entries on Blackness almost endlessly, but I want to move to my third category--just plain good work. Of course, everything you've seen so far has been good work, but I'd like you to look finally at a couple of pieces that I think would fare well in the rather unpolitical atmosphere of an upperclass creative writing course in college. Here's one.

One continuous cotton candy puff
of sky. No blue.
No white.
United
for once to a serene rolling flow of grey mist.

Birds sing with much vigor
perhaps renewed.
Even the slum I live in doesn't seem
too dead.
On days like today
I can hope

maybe even my neighborhood family of children

will have a chance to live.

Quiet is me.

A new equation is born.

Peacefully my worlds are one.

No more territories

of black or white

just world.

Content is me.

What a non-progress motivation

Motivation?

Negative motivation.

Motivation would be progress.

When

I feel like this I don't even

Think

that there are things that need be changed.

All

that is here

is always enough, enough and almost

too much.

At rest is me.

No more bristle.

Nothing to be achieved.

Morally,

Physically

no goal to be achieved.

For an infinite lava like flow of things

past

all goals take care of ambition.

Command this at will?

No such

thing, Mr.

It comes only on days

like this.

I want to conclude with a poem handed in this year. It caught my eye not only because it's strikingly good but because it is very directly about the subject of self-discovery. It argues by implication my whole point in assigning the journal--that classrooms and English teachers, whether in high school or college, must seek a saner balance than they have in the past between self-expression and rules.

To Whom It May Concern

As I peer through this window, I see a reflection.

I am hoping that the window has a curve in it:

If it does not I am a queer figure.

I can see my face but there are two holes for eyes;

The eyes are the window to my soul,

If they are really absent I have a problem.

I had better turn and look at a mirror with a flat face.

Oh, no

To paraphrase, if a kid can't discover his own image in the classroom, he's in trouble. And everything indicates that the new generation of students--black and white--will not accept tamely the role of educated fools. Black students will neither go to college nor perform well there if such has been the burden of their college preparation.